"No Salt Salts Like...."
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Matthew 5:10-16
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It occurred to me during this past week that it has been exactly two years since my family and I came to Lafayette; two years since that September Sunday when I first stood in your pulpit. As I reminisced over the past two years my curiosity took me to my file of old sermons to discover what I said to you onSeptember 18, 1966. I don't do that often: most ministers agree that reading old sermons is a very harrowing experience. But I was curious about the content of that particular sermon.

I found it under the title "You are Salt and Light to the World"; the text was Matthew 5:13-16 . Now, I'm not going to preach that sermon over again, even though I'm certain you would not remember it, because I'm no longer the same person I was then, nor are you. But I am going to use that text. For if there is one questions with which I have struggled for two years - a question that promises to be with me in all the years to come, it is this: "What is the meaning of being the Church of Jesus Christ in 1968?" "What's this Church business really all about?" I know that many of you ask the same question - and if you don't, I hope you will.

The issue was brought sharply into focus for me this week by a letter from a friend of mine; a good friend with whom I studied and who serves a Presbyterian Church in a nearby state. He just resigned; this is the fourth Church he has served since we were ordained; and this time his resignation is not just from that Church, but from the institutional Church altogether.

Men have always dropped out of the ordained ministry, of course; statistically there is nothing significant about my friend's behavior, except that a growing number of men of his age are doing it today; men who emerge from eight long years of higher education full of zeal and enthusiasm, ready to die for the Church; men who, five or six years later, find that they can simply no longer go on playing the game they feel the institutional Church has forced them to play.

In his letter, my friend expressed his feeling that he had yet to find a congregation really willing to be the Church as he understood it - the Church as he understood it to be defined by our Lord Jesus Christ. Put another way, he feels that the New Testament rather specifically defines what a man ought to be who wishes to follow and obey Jesus Christ, but that the CHurch is one of the last places this obedience can be lived. And so he is quitting - and this is what is significant - not because he isn't interested in being a Christian, or a minister, but because he can't be a Christian and a minister in the Church as he has experienced it.

That has come to be a rather fashionable avant garde position in recent years. In Lafayette, Indiana, we are quite remote from the centers of theological education. All may seem well with the Church from where we stand, but all is not well in the seminaries. There the Church is all but dismissed as a viable institution through which a man may channel his Christian concern and zeal. Nearly fifty percent of the seminary graduates today are not going on into the traditional institutional Church. Some will gravitate toward experimental ministries, some will teach in colleges, some will find their niche in welfare work, others will merely take a job in business or industry.

The rationale is this: Jesus called men to him - they were to behis Church. Their call would require two things of them. First - that they love each other, that the fellowship of Jesus be one of complete honesty, great love, and unlimited forgiveness. Second - that they would find their mission out in the world - that they would sacrificially serve and die for others if need be. First - the fellowship in which they would learn that deeper relationship of "brothers in the Lord." second - the mission in the world - the "living for others".

That's what the New Testament describes: that's what Jesus intended. We can't argue with it. And the rationale of the young skeptics continues after the casual observation that nothing in the life of the average congregation today

vaguely resembles what ought to be. To be sure, there are those who are living for others today, those who are putting their lives on the line - in the Peace Corps, in the poverty program, in the Civil Rights movement. But not too much of it is coming from the Church. And so some men quit and other men never even go into the CHurch in the first place, seeking other ways of being what they feel Christ has called them to be.

I disagree with them for quitting, obviously. I remain committed to the Church as an institution. But the worst thing that can happen to me, and to you - the thing that does happen to Churchmen and Churches all the time, is to be anesthetized to the questions these people are asking. The worst thing that can happen is for us to be lulled by the numerical or financial security of the Church into a kind of sleep that refuses to be honest.

We need to be honest about the Church wherever it is. And most of all we need to be radically honest about our own situation. It's not likely to be a comforting exercise: it will probably be jarring and maybe embarrassing and perhaps enfuriating. But if we are at all interested in the Gospel of Jesus Christ it is a discipline we must be continually enforcing on ourselves.

We can begin by saying that whatever is wrong with the Church per se, is reflected - at least in part - in the life of Bethany Presbyterian Church. Christ calls men together - to be that deeper fellowship of love and forgiveness. Christ calls men to worship God together - to gather in one place to celebrate his presence in the world. And about 25% of the members of this congregation do this regularly: and 50% do it occasionally: and 25% do it almost not at all.

Christ calls men to give themselves to the world, and to us - as to most other congregations that means very little. We rejoiced last year when the average giving of this church increased from two to three percent of our income. That was a step, and I don't mean to diminish in any way what it meant to those who participated in it. But integrity demands that we acknowledge that we're still talking about three percent.

Integrity is not always comfortable, but I am convinced that we must always apply it as we attempt to be the Church. There are, of course, a lot of good things to be said about our situation. There are breakthroughs happening with regularity throughout the life of this congregation. But self satisfaction and complacency is like a disease, a diseasefor which the only effective inoculation is a strong dose of integrity. Let us not ever become complacent about the Church. And as we struggle with the questions integrity raises, I would have your attention fixed on that text which I used two years ago.

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men."

I've always been fascinated by that image, and by the fact that Jesus used it to describe the twelve men he had called to him. For them salt was an item of immense value. Its properties of preserving, cleansing and seasoning made it an essential of life. We cannot know for certain whether Jesus meant to emphasize one of those properties when he called his disciples the "Salt of the Earth". We do know the salt, in whatever capacity it is being used, exists for the sake of something else. Salt by itself was not good for much of anything, but when it was applied to a wound or a piece of meat it did what it was intended to do. We do know that salt, when it lost these important properties was used for road building.

Jesus was telling the twelve then, that their task would be to go out into the world in Mission: to engage men and institutions aggressively and to either preserve, cleanse or season. Those are the marching orders for the Church, then, and for the Church today.

It means that the Church which lives for itself, the Church that expends all its energy, time, leadership and money, merely in sustaining its own existence is worth nothing. It means that the essential nature of the Church is to exist for the world - for others - not just for its own sake.

That, I would suggest, is the crux of the matter. We are inclined, all of us, to see this church business as an end in itself. We are inclined to feel that there is something intrinsically noble about attending a worship service, or working in the kitchen, or painting a room. But when these activities, and all the rest which together comprise the life of the congregation, become ends in themselves, we have ceased to be the Church. It's as simple as that. The totality of what we do here - must be for the sake of the world - or it is worth nothing. We worship - in order to go out in mission: we gather in fellowship to express love and concern for each other; we teach a class that a child might discover the love of God; we paint a room that others might enjoy it; we give our money that a man might be healed or taught or made free. It must never be for the sake of ourselves - for when it is, integrity demands that we call Bethany Presbyterian "something else" but not the Church.

Jesus appointed us to be salt to the world. And I'd like to share with you one way you are being salt right now. I attended a meeting of the National Missions Committee of the Synod of Indiana last Thursday and participated in a decision to lend $7,000 of Synod's money to a block club in Indianapolis. The block club is in the midst of a deteriorating neighborhood, a ghetto. Its goals are simple enough - stability and survival. A house is for sale on the block and the club fears what it knows is likely to happen. Someone will buy it, divide it into four or five apartments and add to the process of decay. And so the club tried to buy it in order to fix it up and rent it to one family which needs such a house. But there is not a lending institution in the city that will touch it. The risks are too high.Enter the Church - as salt into a piece of meat. We are lending the money: we may lose it: and again we may not. If all goes well the project will work: the lending institutions will be able to see responsible leadership in the ghetto; the risks will be worth taking, and families are going to be able to have homes. That's being like salt: I love our Church for doing it: and I'm grateful for the salty Presbyterians of Indiana for making it possible.

But that's the Synod. How about Bethany Church? What are we doing? We've given money and time to the Neighborhood Redevelopment Program at Hope Chapel, Lincoln Center, and Big Brothers and Sisters. And we're on the right track. But there is so much more to be done. There is, for instance, an urgent need for a Nursery School on the North Side that will provide a pre-school experience for some of the children just West of here. We have the building: we have the equipment: I am sure we can find the money. We could be like salt for several young lives.

The major producer of salt in this country assumes in it promotional jingle that no other salt is as salty as its salt is. That is, that there are degrees of saltiness. Jesus made the same assumption about the saltiness of his people.

For me, the compelling thing about this text is that he called them salt. He did not say "You must try to be the salt of the earth"; neither did he say, "You must try to have salt, for the earth." He said bluntly - "You are the salt of the earth." He came into their lives at his own initiative. They didn't invite him; he came bringing the love of God for them and teaching them that real life was living out that love for the sake of other men.

So he has come into our lives - time and time again; whether we want to be or not, we are the salt of the earth. And our decision is only "What kind of salt will we be?"

In the final analysis Christianity, in your life and mine, is contained in the way we answer that question: in the decisions we make every day.

That is the great challenge of being a Christian in 1968 - of being the Church in this place at this time. It is a challenge to decide daily what kind of salt am I to be? It is without reservation the most important decision you will make today, tomorrow and every day of your life.

Two years ago, I concluded with a poem by Robert Frost, "The Road NotTaken". It still expresses fully the challenge before the Church and every individual Christian today.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long as I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equal lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Amen.

Almighty God, we pray for theChurch: renew its vigor: give it new life. Give to each one of us a renewed awareness of our task as thy people. Help us together and individually to be good salt. Help us to love the unlovely: to serve and sacrifice for others; to live, not for ourselves, but for the sake of the world; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.